

**Aspiring to have the looks of a celebrity: Young girls' engagement in appearance  
management behaviors**

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### **Abstract**

Research suggests that sexualizing media messages are present in teen media and negatively affect young girls' body image. Yet, it is unknown whether exposure to teen television programs is associated with girls' engagement in appearance-management behaviors. Two-wave longitudinal data among 785 girls (*Mean*=11.65 years) were collected. Results show that teen television exposure was longitudinally related to appearance management, while the reverse relation was not supported. Approximately half of the girls indicated to manage their appearance to some extent, and 13- to 14-year-old girls were more likely to invest in their appearance than younger girls. Thirty percent of those who did not manage their appearance at the start of the study indicated to have initiated appearance management 6 months later. Frequent viewers were four times, three times, and twice as more likely to style their hair, wear heels, and apply make-up compared to non-viewers.

*Conclusion:* The current study showed that teen media exposure plays a role in young girls' appearance management. The findings point to a need to teach young girls about stereotypical messages in media content directed towards them. Prevention efforts should focus on girls who frequently watch teen media.

*Keywords:* tween television, appearance management behaviors, early adolescent girls, gender role

#### **What is known on this subject:**

- Sexualizing media messages are present in teen media.
- Gender identity development is one of the key tasks during adolescence.

#### **What this study adds:**

- Tween television exposure predicts 9- to 14-year-old girls' engagement in appearance-management over time.
- Engagement in appearance-management behaviors did not predict 9- to 14-year-old girls' exposure to tween television programs.

## **Aspiring to have the looks of a celebrity: Young girls' engagement in appearance management behaviors**

Identity formation, especially gender role identity, is one of the most important developmental tasks during adolescence.<sup>1</sup> According to gender schema theories<sup>2-3</sup> children develop ideas about the feminine and masculine gender role by drawing information from their environment. Notably, the media have been argued to teach youth about what it means to be a man or a woman in contemporary society.<sup>4</sup> However, the media are replete with sexualizing messages<sup>5</sup> and concerns have been expressed about the negative consequences of exposure to such messages, especially among young girls.<sup>6</sup>

Sexualizing media messages portray women as objects who are valued solely for their physical appearance and sexual attractiveness by heterosexual, sex-driven men.<sup>5,9</sup> For instance, Kim et al.<sup>7</sup> showed that popular sitcoms in their study contained 9.25 references per hour to men actively pursuing sex and being preoccupied with women's bodies, and 2.54 references per hour to women objectifying themselves and being judged based on their appearance. Kirsch and Murnen<sup>8</sup> added that popular television programs aired on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel in their study contained 2.5 references per hour to boys objectifying and valuing girls solely for their appearance.

Young girls have been shown to be vulnerable to the effects of sexualizing media messages. Specifically, prior research has related exposure to such media messages to self-objectification<sup>9</sup>, body dissatisfaction<sup>10</sup>, and low body esteem.<sup>11</sup> Research investigating the behavioral effects of young girls' exposure to sexualizing media messages are lacking. Nevertheless, expressing one's gendered self is an important part of adolescent development; Engaging in gender-appropriate behaviors becomes important and girls are argued to play an active role in socializing themselves into the feminine role.<sup>12</sup>

An important aspect of the contemporary feminine gender role is that women are to be

sexually attractive to men and, accordingly, to be concerned about and invest in their appearance.<sup>13</sup> And, young girls may learn to accept this notion as part of their own identity.<sup>14</sup> The American Psychology Association (APA) recently warned for the sexualization of girls, by which physical attractiveness is reduced to sexiness, personal value is mostly based on sex appeal, and girls are treated as sexual objects rather than as persons.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, when young girls value their appearance more than other attributes and engage in appearance-focused behaviors in order to look sexually attractive to others (i.e., to self-sexualize), it can be considered problematic.<sup>6</sup> Young girls do not sufficiently comprehend the possible consequences of such behaviors and are only just becoming aware of the fact that they are (or become) sexual beings.<sup>15</sup>

For instance, although clothing is often considered an important way for girls to manage their impression,<sup>5</sup> concerns have been expressed about clothes that are designed to emphasize female attractiveness; When young girls wear high-heeled shoes, it can be considered sexualizing as heels are distinctly associated with women.<sup>16</sup> In addition, although wearing heels might gratify young girls' wish to look older, it negatively affects the musculoskeletal system.<sup>17</sup> The APA Task Force<sup>5</sup> further warns against the use of cosmetics (e.g., lip gloss and perfume), as advertisements often associate cosmetics with adults' desire to be sexually attractive. Most importantly, engaging in self-sexualizing behavior, such as applying make-up<sup>14</sup> and wearing sexualized clothing,<sup>28</sup> has been related to negative consequences, including lower academic achievement,<sup>14</sup> body shame,<sup>18</sup> and negative self-concept.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, research investigating why girls are motivated to engage in such behaviors is warranted. If we combine the assumption of gender schema theory that gender roles are learned from environmental cues<sup>2-3</sup> with literature on gender stereotypical content in teen television programs,<sup>8</sup> then it can be expected that teen television programs might teach girls about the importance of physical attractiveness to women's value. As such, teen television

exposure might be antecedent to young girls' engagement in appearance management behaviors.

Additionally, body image literature has suggested that the relation between media exposure and body image outcomes is complex and probably reciprocal.<sup>19</sup> It is argued that girls choose what content they are exposed to, but simultaneously experience certain consequences of being exposed to that media content.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, in order to obtain more accurate media effects models, it is suggested that media effects and media selection processes should be examined at the same time.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the reverse relation will be examined as well. Although studies examining whether girls' exposure to certain media content depends on their (prior) engagement in certain behaviors are lacking, we expect that girls who manage their appearance are more likely to select media content that supports this appearance focus for girls and women. Specifically, according to cognitive dissonance theory,<sup>22</sup> individuals experience a psychological state of discomfort when they are confronted with inconsistent cognitions.<sup>23</sup> For instance, research shows that when young girls who endorse the thin ideal are asked to speak out against the thin ideal, their beliefs and actions are inconsistent.<sup>24</sup> Individuals who experience such discomfort are motivated to resolve this state of cognitive dissonance by changing one of those cognitive structures.<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, the related selective exposure theory<sup>25</sup> argues that individuals are motivated to avoid information that is cognitively dissonant with their pre-existing cognitions and behaviors while they are prone to select information that supports their engagement in certain behaviors, such as appearance investment. In sum, because individuals strive towards cognitive consistency, it can be reasoned that a girl who is invested in her appearance may be more likely to select media content in which appearances are valued.

## Method

### Participants and procedure

A two-wave study was conducted in 2014. Girls aged 9 to 14 years were recruited from 39 schools in different regions of [country deleted]. The girls and their parents were first informed about study aims, procedures, and confidentiality measures. After active informed consent was obtained from the parents, girls filled out a first questionnaire in the fall of 2014 and were followed up 6 months later. A six month interval was chosen in order to capture developmental trajectories. At both waves, girls completed paper-and-pencil surveys at school during school hours. Researchers were present at all time to supervise the data collection and to ensure optimal circumstances (i.e., making sure all children could work in silence and fill in the questionnaire privately). Girls were encouraged to ask questions when items were unclear. No incentive was provided as is customary in [country deleted]. This study was approved by the ethics board of the host university. Of 922 participants, 785 girls (85.14%) completed both questionnaires. Ninety-three percent of the respondents were born in [country deleted]. Number of books at home was used as a proxy-indicator of SES.<sup>25,26</sup> Only 9.2% of the girls indicated to have less than 10 books at home, 19.4% had between 11 and 25 books at home, 29.6% owned over 100 books. The majority of the girls (41.8%), however, indicated to own between 26 and 100 books. The mean age at baseline was 11.65 ( $SD = .98$ ). A MANOVA analysis showed that girls who had only participated in wave 1 ( $N = 140$ ) did not differ from girls who participated in both waves of the study with regard to the key variables (at time 1),  $V = .005$ ,  $F(4, 715) = .818$ ,  $p = .514$ ,  $np^2 = .005$ .

### Measures

*Exposure to teen television programs.* Using a 5-point scale ranging from *Never* (=1) to *Almost every day* (=5), respondents indicated how often they watched eight programs that are specifically created for the tween audience (i.e., *Big Time Rush*, *H2O Just Add Water*, *Life*

*With Boys*, *Wingin' It*, *Young Justice*, *Jessie*, *Austin & Ally*, and *Violetta*). *Violetta*, for instance, is a popular girl who is accepted to attend a famous art academy where she finds love and friendship, but has to deal with her overprotective father. *Big Time Rush* focuses on four hockey players after they form a boyband. The choice for teen television programs was based on research that documented the prevalence of gender stereotypes (e.g., boys valuing girls solely for their attractiveness, girls using feminine courtship strategies such as touching themselves suggestively to attract boys while boys use material or status power to attract girls) in this type of program<sup>8</sup> and the popularity of teen television programs and channels (i.e., Nickelodeon, The Disney Channel) among [country deleted] 9- to 14-year-olds.<sup>28</sup> The programs that were included in the questionnaire were programs that were broadcast at the time of the study (time 1).

*Appearance management behaviors.* Respondents indicated their engagement in five appearance management behaviors (i.e., applying make-up, hairstyling, hair dyeing, wearing heels, and exercising to get a good physique/body) on a scale ranging from *Never* (=1) to *Always* (=5). These behaviors were chosen based on prior research on the sexualization of girls and appearance management among women. Specifically, applying make-up and wearing heels have been considered self-sexualizing behaviors.<sup>5,16</sup> Furthermore, Smolak, Murnen, and Myers (2014) included hair styling and hair dyeing in their measure of self-sexualizing behavior among women.<sup>29</sup> Lastly, prior research has identified exercising to get a good body as an appearance management behavior among young women.<sup>30</sup> To get an overall estimate of girls' engagement in appearance management, we first conducted a principal component analysis which yielded one factor (*eigenvalue*: 2.32; *explained variance*: 46.42%;  $\alpha = .71$ ). In order to get an overall estimate of girls' engagement in appearance management, the items were summed up (i.e., the composite score). Subsequently, the variable was dichotomized to distinguish those engaging from those not engaging in appearance

management. To examine the reciprocity between appearance management and tween media exposure in structural equation modeling (AMOS), appearance management was treated as a latent variable comprising all five behaviors.

*Control variables.* In line with prior research, we included a number of covariates that could confound the studied relations.<sup>31-34</sup> First, respondents indicated their age. Second, we calculated their BMI by dividing their (self-reported) weight by their squared height. Third, we measured respondents' pubertal status by using three items from the Pubertal Development Scale.<sup>35</sup>

### **Statistical analysis**

Mean values, frequencies, and zero-order correlations were calculated (Table 1). The present analyses were conducted in two steps. First, to examine the reciprocal relation between exposure to teen television programs and appearance management behaviors, a cross-lagged model was tested using structural equation modelling in AMOS. The fit of the model was evaluated with the chi-squared-to-degrees-of-freedom ratio ( $\chi^2/df$ ), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The FIML (full information maximization likelihood) method has been shown to be the best method to handle missing data in structural equation modelling<sup>36</sup> and was therefore used to address missing data in AMOS. Second, to test for initiation of appearance management behaviors among those who indicated not to engage in appearance management at baseline, separate logistic regression models were run for the appearance management behaviors in SPSS. First, to address missing data in SPSS multiple imputation method was used. Multiple imputation creates new complete datasets (usually five) in which the missing values are imputed. Each of these imputed datasets is analysed separately and results are pooled. Second, overall appearance management and all separate behaviors were recoded to distinguish those who engaged from those who did not engage in the behaviors. All analyses



controlled for respondents' age, BMI, and pubertal status.

## Results

### Subjects

Of the 785 girls who completed both questionnaires, 363 engaged in appearance management (i.e., scored higher than 10 on the composite score of appearance management) at baseline (48.5%); about half of the 9- to 14-year-olds indicated applying make-up and wearing heels (51.5% and 44.7%, respectively), the majority of the respondents (76.5%) exercised to get a good physique and styled their hair (65.4%); one in five (21.5%) indicated to dye their hair. Results further indicated that girls between 13 and 14 years old reported engaging more frequently in hair styling (70.4%,  $F(1,779) = 8.01, p < .001$ ), hair dying (25.3%,  $F(1,779) = 3.01, p = .05$ ), applying make-up (58%,  $F(1,779) = 4.93, p < .01$ ), and exercising (84%,  $F(1,799) = 4.35, p = .01$ ) than girls between 9 and 10 years and girls between 11 and 12 years old. Overall, thirty percent (29.1%) of the girls who did not engage in appearance management behaviors at the start of the study indicated to have initiated appearance management 6 months later. *Jessie* ( $M = 3.36, SD = 1.58$ ) and *Austin and Ally* ( $M = 3.14, SD = 1.62$ ) were the most popular teen programs and were watched several times per month, followed by *Violetta* ( $M = 2.93, SD = 1.66$ ), *Big Time Rush* ( $M = 2.78, SD = 1.52$ ), *H2O Just Add Water* ( $M = 2.74, SD = 1.56$ ), *Life With Boys* ( $M = 2.55, SD = 1.59$ ), and *Wingin' it* ( $M = 2.07, SD = 1.46$ ). *Young Justice* ( $M = 1.24, SD = .83$ ) was the least popular and was almost never watched by girls in our study. Older girls (12 to 14 years old) only significantly watched *Wingin' it* more frequently than 9- to 10-year old and 11- to 12-year old girls,  $F(1,779) = 3.80, p < .05$ .

### Television Viewing and Appearance Management Behaviors

The cross-lagged model (Figure 1,  $N = 785$ ) examining the reciprocal relation between exposure to teen television programs and appearance management (latent variable comprising

five behaviors) showed a good fit of the data. The model controlled for respondents' age, BMI, and pubertal status and yielded a chi-square value of 105.49 with 69 degrees of freedom,  $p < .01$ , RMSEA = .03, CFI = .98,  $\chi^2/df = 1.53$ . The results revealed that exposure to teen television programs at time 1 predicted young girls' engagement in appearance management behaviors at time 2 ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $SE = .04$ , 95%CI [.018, .142],  $p < .05$ ). Results further revealed that engagement in appearance management at time 1 did not predict girls' exposure to teen television programs at time 2 ( $\beta = -.014$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95%CI [-.065, .043],  $p = .67$ ).

Subsequently, separate logistic regressions were conducted to examine the initiation of appearance management (see Table 2). Girls who watched teen television programs once to twice per week were 4 times more likely to initiate in hairstyling and twice as likely to start applying make-up compared to girls who never watched teen programming. Lastly, watching teen television programs once to twice per week increased girls' odds of wearing heels at time 2 by three. Girls did not initiate exercising to get a good physique and hair coloring if they watched teen television programs more frequently at baseline.

## **Discussion**

This study is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to investigate appearance management behaviors among 9- to 14-year-old girls. Documenting the prevalence of and factors antecedent to such behaviors among young girls increases our understanding of the phenomenon of the sexualization of girlhood in contemporary society. Approximately half of the girls in our study indicated to manage their appearance to some extent (at baseline), and 13- to 14-year-old girls were more likely to invest in their appearance than younger girls. Specifically, girls indicated to apply make-up, wear heels, and exercise to get a good physique. Such behaviors allow women and girls to control their presentation and the impression of others,<sup>37</sup> but impose health risks for young girls.<sup>37-38</sup> Furthermore, by engaging

in behaviors that may be considered inappropriate for them, young girls appear to be accepting the narrow idea that sexual attractiveness is a woman's primary value<sup>15</sup>, and as such contribute toward their own sexualization.<sup>5</sup> In addition, this attitude can negatively impact girls in various domains, including self-esteem and academic orientation.<sup>14</sup> And, when girls present themselves in sexualized ways, research shows that others rate them as less intelligent, competent, capable and determined, and low in self-respect and morality.<sup>39</sup>

The results further demonstrate that exposure to teen television programs is longitudinally related to engagement in appearance management, independent of other relevant factors such as BMI and pubertal timing. Among frequent viewers of teen television programs, the odds ratio of initiating appearance management behaviors was four times, three times, and twice as large for, respectively, hair styling, wearing heels, and applying make-up, compared to non-viewers. Prior research has documented girls' acceptance of appearance ideals in the media as personal standards (i.e., the internalization of appearance ideals).<sup>9-11</sup> The key contribution of the current study is that it adds to this line of research that young girls actually engage in behaviors to align their appearance with the prescribed appearance ideals when they frequently watch teen television programs. This finding points to the need to increase children's awareness of the stereotypical portrayal of men and women in the media, also in media content directed towards them. Notably, girls in the current study initiated appearance management behaviors when they frequently watched teen television programs rather than vice versa. The selective exposure hypothesis was thus not supported by our data.

The current findings inform health practitioners and educators on the segments of young girls that should be targeted by intervention initiatives. Specifically, frequent viewers of teen television programs were more likely to (start to) manage their appearance. Additionally, the current findings show that, despite the fact that teen television programs are promoted as being more attuned to the cognitions of teens, these programs also exert a negative influence

on girls. By discussing media content with their daughters, mothers have been shown to be an important protective factor against young girls' self-sexualization.<sup>40</sup> The current findings recommend mothers to discuss the content in teen television programs with their daughters as well.

In order to design effective intervention campaigns, it will further be important to investigate the mechanisms through which teen television programs stimulate girls to manage their appearance. Appearance management has, for instance, been considered a strategy to cope with social appearance anxiety.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, prior research has built on objectification theory to relate media exposure to appearance management<sup>42</sup> and self-sexualization<sup>43</sup> among college students. Future studies might also consider peers as a factor that enforces the self-sexualization of girls. Girls can become part of an appearance culture in which physical appearance dominates much of the conversations and behaviors.<sup>6</sup>

Some limitations of the current study should be noted. Although the television programs questioned in the current study were U.S. produced media content and prior studies have demonstrated that [country deleted] girls also experience negative effects from media exposure on their body image,<sup>44</sup> the generalizability of our findings is limited by the specific [country deleted] context in which the study was set. Moreover, no conclusions can be drawn about which aspects of teen television content stimulate girls to manage their appearance. Although content analyses have documented teen television programs' depiction of sexual attractiveness as a woman's primary value,<sup>8</sup> and prior studies have related exposure to such messages with body image disturbances,<sup>9-11</sup> the media message that attractiveness is rewarded with popularity and romantic success might also underlie girls' inclination to manage their appearance. Future studies are necessary to stipulate which media messages motivate girls to engage in appearance management behaviors. Additionally, we did not measure the extent of sexualization or occurrence of appearance behaviors in the programs that were measured.

Future studies could benefit from attributing more weight to those programs high in sexualization or appearance focus (see for instance Vandenbosch & Eggermont<sup>9</sup>). Lastly, only teen television content was examined given the popularity of such programs among [country deleted] girls.<sup>28</sup> However, future studies might benefit from including other media variables as well.

### **Conclusion**

The sexualization of girls in contemporary society has fueled scholarly attention.<sup>5,6</sup> The current study was, as far as we know, the first to ask girls how often they engaged in various appearance related behaviors and showed that exposure to teen television programs plays a role in young girls' (initiation of) appearance management behaviors. These findings thus offer important new insights and contribute to existing literature on girls' self-sexualization. Specifically, by engaging in appearance-focused behaviors, young girls appear to acknowledge the importance of looking attractive to others. In addition, the findings could be of considerable relevance to health practitioners, educators, and parents as they point out that media content created for younger audiences should also be considered a risk factor for young girls' appearance investment, and ultimately self-sexualization.

**Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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